



Pararescuemen run to board an MH-53 Pave Low special operations helicopter during a training mission at Hurlburt Field, Fla. The 1st Special Operations Wing Airmen go through intensive training, often provided by former air commandos.

Way of the warrior

Air commandos embody a living combat heritage

by Staff Sgt. Matthew Rosine, photos by Tech Sgt. Larry Simmons

To the enemy, air commandos are faceless demons who gaze through mountains and hear whispers miles away on the darkest night. They can halt the wind, rain and lightning. In the breach of the storm, their voices roar across the sky, shaking the Earth — a call that summons hellfire from the heavens to incinerate their foes.

Smoldering, scorched craters are the only footprints they leave as they fade into nothingness.

To their allies, these special operations forces are enigmatic friends. That's how an Uzbek Airman described the American Airmen operating from a base in his country a few years ago.

"They're the boogeyman," the Uzbek sergeant said. "Of all the American fighting forces, the bad guys are afraid of these Airmen the most."

These special operators wield awesome power in battle, but seek no glory. Highly skilled professionals, their hands can crush and kill, but those same hands also heal, save and nurture.

These Airmen, forged in the furnace of battle, tempered by the sweat of perseverance and polished by precision training, are some of the nation's most elite warriors. They'll stand alone against overwhelming odds. And those who seek their help know they'll fight with every ounce of their will, even die, so others may live.

Today, these Airmen are bringing fear to the enemy in every skirmish of the war on terrorism. That's nothing new. It's something they've been doing well for more than 60 years.

"Their heritage continues. It hasn't ended," retired air commando Col. Jim Connors said. "These guys are writing history every day."



A combat controller pulls a 185-pound “wounded Airman” dummy as part of the combat stress course special operators go through at Hurlburt Field. The training, which includes a variety of shooting and tactical exercises, prepares Airmen for the rigors and stress of combat.

The colonel once commanded the 16th Operations Group at Hurlburt Field, Fla., home of the 1st Special Operations Wing air commandos. The base on the Florida Gulf Coast is part of that living heritage. Streets bear the names of fallen commandos. And the tales of their deeds are part of local lore.

Born in battle

Like all great stories passed from one generation to another, the air commandos’ tale — heritage — began six decades ago. Shrouded by the mist of time and covered in the veil of legend, it’s a tale full of heroic people and memorable events.

The legacy began in the jungles of Japanese-occupied Burma during World War II. The British waged an “unconventional hit-and-run war” there. Their guerilla tactics were to assault communication and resupply lines. But its many missions stretched the British forces thin. So they turned to their American ally for the air support critical to their mission success.

Gen. Henry “Hap” Arnold called for an all-volunteer corps of what he coined American “air commandos” to meet the unique challenge. The Airmen were a self-contained force operating



A pararescueman hoists other members of his team aboard an MH-53 Pave Low helicopter during a fast-roping exercise at Hurlburt Field. Special operations Airmen are always training to deal with changing enemy tactics.



Airman First Class Morgan Morris and other pararescuemen and combat controllers get ready for another round of rigorous pre-scuba training at Hurlburt Field. All special operations Airmen must go through four weeks of scuba training.

fighter and airlift aircraft. It provided all its own maintenance and support.

On March 5, 1944, Operation Thursday launched successfully and the commandos attacked enemy forces from the air, resupplied British commandos on the ground and airlifted the wounded out of the battle. Twenty-four days later the Airmen were officially renamed the 1st Air Commando Group. This was the foundation of the air commando heritage.

“The importance of the air commando heritage is what we pass on to the next generation,” said Colonel Connors, from New York, who flew AC-130 gunships. “We have been all over the world. We have stories about what we finished and did on past missions. We need to tell those stories to the people who are doing that mission today.”

Colonel Connors served in Somalia. He said what special operators are doing today is even more important than what they did in the past. Learning about the past, he said, “the way we did things, the mistakes we made, the good things we did, will help them (today’s air commandos) have the spirit, fire and drive to do what they need to do for the country today and in the future.”

Yesterday’s commandos are preserving their heritage — and its many stories — at the Air Commandos Association headquarters in Mary Esther, a few minutes drive from Hurlburt.

“Our (association’s) purpose, and this was established by (Brig. Gen. Harry Aderholt) in 1967, is to promote special ops. We

honor special people,” said retired Lt. Col. Sam Sambogna, the association’s president, who served in Vietnam. “We have a hall of fame of people who are retired, or on active duty who have done significant things.”

Airmen who visit the hall of heritage will be welcomed with more than bright smiles and firm handshakes from weathered hands. The library shelves are full of books with tales of valor and courage; tales of the secret wars and the Airmen who made them successful.

In the association’s hall of heroes, the faint scents of freshly cleaned glass, old metal and older newspapers fill the air. The walls are a collage of color and black-and-white photos, drawings and memorabilia. The “forcibly taken” sword of a Japanese officer lies partially unwrapped from its brown paper bed on the far side of the room. It sits on top of a glass display case as it waits to find a home in one of the many other cases in the room. And on the short front wall — centered in its rightful place of prominence — is the large wooden plaque whose small golden name plates shine with the engraved names of heroes.

“These people made great contributions to special ops,” Colonel Sambogna said.

The association works to keep the air commando heritage vital for today’s Airmen, he said. The “old timers” still regularly visit and support Hurlburt Airmen and their families and host social gatherings to pass on their heritage face-to-face to today’s air

commandos.

“We want to continue the link to the past,” said Colonel Sambogna, who is from Manchester, Conn. “We (want to) keep a bond between the old guys and the new folks because it is the same thing, the same mission and the same enthusiasm for special operations.”

The new warriors

At Hurlburt, Airmen continue carrying the torch passed to them from the past. Today’s air commandos are still lighting the way for mission success wherever the Air Force — or others — need them.

As the Air Force celebrates its 60th anniversary, Air Force Special Operations Command and air commandos past and present are reflecting on their heritage, Lt. Gen. Michael Wooley said. The AFSOC commander said today’s silent warriors don’t forget from where they came.

“You look back on World War II, Vietnam, the fighting in Korea, and there are air commando heroes in every one of those conflicts,” the general said. “The folks who wear the uniform of an air commando today really look back and cherish and celebrate those great heroes who have gone before them. We get inner strength from them to carry on in this global war.”

The command stays busy. Its special mission is to provide Air Force special operations forces and capabilities around the world.



Airman 1st Class Sean Goodstein learns to scrunch his nose as part of his pre-scuba training.



As part of their pre-scuba training, all special operations Airmen must demonstrate they can jump into the water with all their scuba gear.

Highly trained and rapidly deployable, these Airmen use state-of-the-art equipment and aircraft. Their missions range from precise application of firepower to infiltration, exfiltration, re-supply and aerial refueling. The command's 13,000 total force Airmen use the AC-130H/U — Spectre and Spooky — gunships, C-130 Hercules, EC-130 Commando Solo, MC-130 Combat Talon, MQ-1 Predator and MH-53 Pave Low helicopters.

Needless to say, heritage plays an important role in the day-to-day lives of special operations Airmen. Many retired air commandos are now serving at Hurlburt as instructors — passing on their hands-on knowledge. It's part of the wing's concept of Airmen training Airmen.

One of the courses Airmen go through is the pre-scuba training course. Instructors like retired combat controller Master Sgt. Tom Bevan and retired pararescueman Master Sgt. Bill Lyons run Airmen through rigorous, water-logged hours in the training pool. Students have to “fight off” the instructors who are trying to “drown” them. But as Airmen battle through the fear and exhaustion, their instructors, Airmen who were once in their fins, help them succeed.

“There is no one common issue,” said Staff Sgt. James Light, a combat controller and advanced skills training instructor. “Each individual has his own devils to work out under water.”

He said the job is, in part, to play psychologist and help trainees battle their demons.

“For the most part, we work them up to being as proficient as we can in a four-week period,” the sergeant said.

The Airmen-training-Airmen concept provides constant real-world feedback that benefits the entire air commando community.

“We learn those lessons that are handed down. We do apply them,” General Wooley said.

The general said a good example involves the MQ-1 Predator that air commandos fly over Iraq and Afghanistan. Those who fly the unmanned aerial vehicle will pass on what they learned.

“That is what gives us our edge in this ever-changing war,” the general said.

Tomorrow’s team

That also means the role of special operations will continue to evolve, as it has since the Burma days. While most of the Air Force is operationally slimming down, the special operations role is growing and expanding. The 720th Special Tactics Group and the 6th Special Operations Squadron are prime examples.

The group opened its training pipeline to enlisted cross-trainees from other Air Force specialties. And the squadron is doubling in size. This unique team is the only one in the Department of Defense with an aerial foreign internal defense mission, which relies heavily on operationally experienced Airmen, many of whom possess foreign language skills, the general said. This mission happens when the United States helps support another nation's internal defense.

“We are in a growth spurt,” General Wooley said. “We are excited about the future of AFSOC.”

The general said the Air Force and U.S. Special Operations Command realize the command's need to recapitalize.

“They recognize that we need to have increases in our battlefield Airmen numbers,” the general said. “They agree we should increase the capability of our foreign internal defense squadron.”

The command is also revitalizing its aerial arsenal with a

new aircraft the special ops community can't stop talking about — the CV-22 Osprey. Currently, the command's battlefield “work-horse” is the MH-53, a low-level, long-range, battle-tested helicopter that served for three decades. But the addition of the versatile Osprey provides new operational capabilities.

“Bringing on board the CV-22 is a marvelous transformational event for us,” General Wooley said. “To have an aircraft that can fly 250 knots, pull into a hover and land exactly where you need it to on the battlefield — with 18 combat-loaded air commandos, Army special forces or Navy SEALs — is just incredible.

“The future of AFSOC and air commandos is very bright and on the upswing,” he said.

One example of the growth is Hurlburt's new advanced skills training center. Walking into the building, the importance of heritage is the first thing students, instructors and visitors see. The foyer is simple and clean, from its hard-tile floors to the illuminated walls and ceiling. The walls divide the room into three separate areas. Each one pays homage to one of the Air Force's three tactical combat Airmen: Combat controllers, pararescuemen and combat weathermen.

But the importance of heritage doesn't end at the door; it is a vital part of every training area.

“Basically, we try to show these guys the skills they need to progress in their careers. This also helps keep them safe on the battlefield and shows them as much as possible in a training environment before they have to apply it to a combat situation,” said instructor Tech Sgt. Ryan Stanhope, a combat controller.

“We can induce a lot of things they may not see in combat. The more prepared we get them here, and the more things we can show them in a controlled environment, the better they are going to be able to handle themselves on the battlefield,” the sergeant said.

Another aim is to prepare Airmen so they can adapt to things on the battlefield they may not have foreseen, he said.

“The training they receive here is phenomenal,” Sergeant Stanhope said.

Sergeant Stanhope learned this truth the hard way. Like many of the instructors, he has been in war zones on five major deployments since Sept. 11, 2001. He has put his special training to use. Now he passes on the significance of training, and what he learned in combat, to the next generation of special operators.

“The training I had was a gradual progression, but it was quality training and it definitely got me ready for a lot of the missions that I was exposed to in combat,” the Bronze Star recipient from Portland, Maine, said. “I had the opportunity to really focus a lot in a training environment before I went to war.

“A lot of these guys could get to their units and potentially deploy pretty fast. That is why we are trying to do as much training as we can in the beginning,” Sergeant Stanhope said.

Ultimately the training prepares today's Airmen and gives them the knowledge, skill, preparation and integrity to carry the air commando combat heritage into the future. The more prepared they are, the more versatile they are on the battlefield. And the more fearsome they are to the enemy.

“Anything that is thrown at them, they can take it,” Sergeant Light said about the Airmen he readies for war. “They can adapt and move on. I always tell (my Airmen) it is better to be a wolf than a sheep.”

The bad guys hate that. 🐺



In the waning hours of a long day of training, combat controller Senior Airman Jake Quigg gets his gear ready for another extensive day of training.